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# HOME LIFE . . . . . . . . IN MEXICO.



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## Home life in Mexico.

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It is said of the French, that their language contains no word equivalent to *home*, in an English sense, that for "house" conveying all the meaning given by that nation to the word home. It is true that the French have not English and American homes, but it is hard for one who has read of some phases of French life, and who has traveled in rural France, especially, to believe that there is no spirit of the home in that republic, however lacking the language in adequate expression of this charming word.

The Spanish language, as used in Mexico, has somewhat the same limitations as the French, in conveying the idea of home,—although there are expressions corresponding to English terms for house, dwelling, domicile and others, and, notwithstanding the dictionaries, Mexicans, in common speech, rarely use any other word for home, except that meaning house, which is *casa*.

There is one Spanish word which to me always suggests a pleasant idea, and which is used in literature to convey the more spiritual idea of the intimacy of the family relation in the house, and this word is *hogar*, meaning *hearth*. Strange word to be used by a people who never have fire-places in their houses, and who do not know what hearths are, as we use the word! Yet "El Hogar" is the frequent title of that page of the newspaper devoted to the home circle, and many Spanish poets have glorified the hearth.

I have dwelt at length upon this, merely to show that while the Spanish, along with other languages, may seem to us deficient in an expression for home-life, the idea that the word conveys, is not unknown to the Mexicans, and their homes are homes, although not conducted in accordance with our American idea.

The missionary, after long residence in Mexico, or extensive travel through the Republic, while "opening up" the work here and there, may become acquainted with a few families of the better or best class, but as a rule, he works and lives identified with the lower class, with poor, and not always "respectable" people.

Let us in the first place, consider the home-life of a family belonging to the upper and wealthy class. Such families, in a city, sometimes occupy an entire house, or they may use *suites* of apartments comprising one or two floors of the house, renting the lower floor as stores or shops, and

having a private entrance and staircase for their own use.

These houses are of stone or of \**adobe*, plastered over, and often colored blue, yellow, green or gray. Whether of one or several stories in height they are always built around a court, with windows and doors and corridors opening upon the court. The grim exterior of many of the houses, with their iron barred windows, massive entrances and stone-paved halls, is relieved by glimpses from the street, into the court, where flowers bloom, fountains play, and statues hide among the plants and orange trees. The large *salas*, or parlors of these houses of the prosperous are furnished richly if somewhat primly. Costly curtains hang at the windows, and brightly-dyed skins, or thick carpets are spread over the tiled floors. There are pictures on the walls, and long rows of chairs are arranged against the walls facing each other, while at the end of the room is the sofa, the seat of honor, flanked by a pair of huge arm chairs or American rockers. A centre table holds a medley of curious bric-a-brac, of plaster images, marvellous vases filled with grasses or topped by the many colored glass balls intended for beautifying Christmas trees, candle-sticks and lamps. There are no books to be seen in the *sala*, as the room is devoted to the reception of visitors and to family gatherings. In the breezy corridors the ladies of the house sit

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\*A large sun-dried brick of a gray color.

and work at embroidery and other sewing, while the men ride or drive out to the *haciendas* (farms,) or spend the day in office or store.

Breakfast is served at a more or less late hour, and is a slight meal, a cup of coffee and bread being what is usually required, and while some dine at one o'clock, many lunch lightly at that hour, then have *merienda*, or afternoon lunch of chocolate and buns or cakes, and dine at a late hour of the evening.

The evening often finds happy domestic gatherings in the big *sala*, where the father and mother are surrounded by their children, and merry conversation and music enliven the hours. Often the theatre, concert, ball, or promenade in the electric lighted *plaza*, or open square, interferes with the family gathering at home, as the *senoritas* must be chaperoned by the mother, aunt or other female relation, at the dance, or in the strolls round and round the beautiful square. In the *plaza* the delightful music of the far famed Mexican bands charms the ear on certain evenings of each week, the night-blooming jessmine and the orange-flowers fill the air with fragrance, and the geraniums and *marguerites*, grown to trees in size, throw large shadows across the pavements where the promenaders pace to and fro, the gentlemen in one direction, the ladies in the other, constantly meeting, constantly passing yet rarely exchanging a word.

Ten o'clock usually finds the *plazas* hushed and the streets deserted by passers-by, though the lights burn late in the home, and the cook and house-maids are still clattering dishes in the kitchen when the town clock points to ten.

Though there are no warm hearth-stones for the Mexicans in winter, the sun shines always in the court and street, and for warmth, the gentlemen merely muffle themselves in picturesque cloaks, faced with velvet or plush, while the ladies wrap their shawls more closely about their heads and shoulders, and out-of-doors, even wear the wide-sleeved imported cloaks with their Parisian bonnets. In summer these fortunate ones go to watering-places or baths, or to their country-houses, closing the town-houses for the season.

Many travel abroad, to the United States, to France, to Spain.

The family priest is a familiar and trusted friend, especially among the women, and the light occupations of the day—embroidery, drawn-work on linen, and perhaps a little French novel-reading, are varied by attendance upon mass, confession and vesper services.

In short, the home-life and pleasures of the so-called better class of Mexicans resembles that of the rest of their brothers and sisters of a like religion and civilization in other countries.

It is only in the last quarter of a century that it has been considered necessary to teach the women of the land anything beyond a knowledge

of the "saints' lives" and the prayer-books, a great deal of exquisite embroidery and a little music; therefore, it is not surprising that these are behind the men in a growing liberality of opinion, and that they are still, in a measure, ignorant of the common branches of knowledge and religiously superstitious.

The pleasures and occupations of the middle class are those of the higher on a slighter scale. In attending the Sunday bull fights, these buy their tickets for "seats in the sun" if unable to afford those "in the shade." They patronize the six-cent baths rather than those costing twenty-five cents. The women of this class wear no hats, always using black shawls instead, and they often work to help in the support of their families as seamstresses, milliners and teachers in the public schools.

The homes of this class are clean and attractive. If no other picture adorns the walls of the home, some representation of "Mary the mother of God" hangs there; perhaps a picture of her is found in every room. Instead of the summer spent at San Pedro, or a winter in the City of Mexico, an outing, or *paseo*, on the street car once a week is ample diversion for the family of the middle class. From many cities of the republic the mule street-car lines run out into the country for many miles to pleasant spots on the river, or to private gardens, which may be hired by the year at a moderate cost, or to the delight-



ful bathing establishments, where baths cost from three cents upward. As the years pass, many of the happy middle class are being brought to attend our mission services, and now and then, here and there, the gospel is introduced among them by the conversion from Romanism of the thoughtful, intelligent father, or of the boy or girl in attendance upon our mission-schools. True it has been that from the days of our Saviour's teaching in Syria until now, where we are trying to fulfill his command of teaching "all nations," *to the poor the good tidings are preached*. Perhaps it will always be that the gospel will first be preached to those of low degree, however better those of higher mental culture might seem to us.

Therefore, I turn with pleasure to the homes of those among whom the missionary finds his readiest hearer. These homes are not unworthy of notice, though the house-walls are of *adobe*, the floor often the ground upon which the walls are built, and the furnishings common and scarce. I have in my mind one home which may serve as an example of hundreds of those and of others belonging to the poor, yet perhaps not the most destitute class.

The entrance opens directly from the narrow sidewalk into a hallway, thence into a wide courtyard, surrounded by the rooms of the house, all of which are of one story, and covered with a dingy, crumbling plaster. Several families occupy this house, connected or not by ties of blood.

Entering the court and turning to the left, there is a doorway leading into a long room lighted by this doorway and a small window high in the wall and overlooking the street. The earth-floor is worn into holes and ridges from much leaking of the roof above and much trampling of sandalled feet. Here the family spends its days and nights. The father makes a cheap kind of beer, besides working at the huge hand-and-foot loom in one corner of the room, and his small vat and other appliances occupy a closet opening out of the larger room. Posts here and there support the roof, and the window is filled with bird cages whose little occupants, canaries and gold-finches, drown my voice while reading or speaking, and from their nest on the sill tiny white mice scamper over my hat brim and tickle my shoulder.

The mother and daughters work all day long, winding the thread from hanks of dyed cotton on short pieces of reeds, to be slipped into the father's shuttle, for weaving into scarfs. The busy workers sit on low stools and turn their wheels often in silence, yet I do not doubt that grave subjects are at times discussed among them, and I know that I have sometimes seen a New Testament and a pair of spectacles lying conveniently near a certain wheel. The babies, little grandchildren, who live with their parents in other parts of the house, sprawl on the floor or slumber in their mothers' laps, and work rarely pauses during the whole day except for the simple

preparation and eating of the midday meal of beans and thin cakes of cornmeal. It takes many hours of hard work to gain even the few cents needed for the daily wants of a poor Mexican family, whether the work be thread-winding, blanket-weaving, shawl-fringe tying, tortillamaking, or any of the more common trades.

In the house described, there is but one bed, hard and narrow. I never learned which of the family occupied that post of honor and comfort, but it was easy to understand that the rest simply folded blankets about them and stretched themselves upon the floor at night, happy if possessing a cushion or a mat of reeds.

Sometimes I found the family at work in the sunny court-yard with the blue sky overhead, and hardy flowers blooming in boxes and pots at their feet. The love of the Mexican woman for her flowers is only surpassed by her intense love for her children. Here, I must mention, that the making of flower-jars is a branch of industry much cultivated. On certain days in the week, donkeys are driven in from the small ranches near the cities, laden with immense cargoes of red or yellow jars of every size and shape, to be sold at the markets, from a cent and a half, in price, up to several dollars. Large banana trees are raised in jars of the largest size, and the delicate smilax and oxalis in the graceful little ones, over which American travelers grow wild and extravagant. The poorest family will have a

green plant in the court, even if it be nothing more than a sprig of some savory herb, to season the broth.

Sundays and the very frequent religious and national feast-days are observed as holidays by all classes, and no work is done from eve to eve. Stores are closed and the streets filled with careless and happy saunterers, and devout churchgoers, while

“Bells make Catholic the trembling air.”

Bull-fight and theatre-plays have free course on such days, and the street cars are thronged with pleasure seekers, at three cents each. Returning home at sunset, tired, yet contented, they lie down to sleep, needing but an inch of candle to light them to their respective mats or beds.

It is wonderful to find how many homes contain a relative, not one of the immediate family,—an aged grandparent, an aunt, an orphan child, who has been given to them or found in distress. The patient, kindly Mexican opens his door, and shares his \*tortillas with the needy, and believes that he is pleasing God, and thus helping to save his soul.

The Christian home, by which, I mean the Protestant home, where parents are no longer Roman Catholics, is essentially different in two respects from the home of the Romanist. First, the Bible is read lovingly and studiously, and it is often the only book possessed beyond the

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\*Thin corn-cake, the national bread of Mexico.

paper-backed school books of the children, where the children can be spared to attend school. Secondly, Sunday is observed as a day of sacred rest, and by attendance upon worship in the mission church. The children and adults attend Sunday school and preaching services, and afterwards spend the rest of the day in quiet reading or talking in their homes, until the evening service, which is also faithfully attended. As the years pass, and the children of Protestants marry, and rear families, a Protestant ancestry is being established. Few of the adult members of our churches have had Protestant parents. Remembering this, can we wonder at the weakness of some of our Mexican brothers and sisters? Truly, the heritage of Christian fore fathers is a blessed one, and parenthetically here, I would urge increased interest in our Madero Institute for girls, and the Zaragoza Institute for boys, both in Saltillo, where many of the mothers and fathers of the coming generation of Mexicans are being instructed, not only in the Bible and Baptist doctrines, but also in the principles of cleanliness, orderly lives and loyalty to their country.

Since the partial emancipation of Mexico from the rule of the clergy, legal marriage has become possible for the lower classes. The exorbitant demands of the priests, in former times, for the payment of large sums upon a performance of the marriage ceremony, hindered many a poor man and woman from taking upon themselves any

vows more binding than those imposed by their relations to each other. The great patriot Juarez had a part in the making of the law by which the rights of civil marriage were restored to the courts, so that the marriage ceremony, performed except by a civil officer is no longer legal according to the laws of Mexico.

Naturally, the devout Romanist has his civil marriage confirmed or introduced by a religious ceremony at the altar, if possible, but this is no longer a necessary form.

Those who have been living out of wedlock under such compulsion of fate, and who wish to unite with our mission-churches, as members "in good standing," are of course required, before admission, to submit to the legal ceremony of marriage, and it makes one happy to realize the greater peace and security resulting to both parties in such a transaction, by the restraints of a wise law imposed upon them.

A volume might be written to set forth the many interesting points in the home-life of the Mexicans, impossible to be touched upon in this space. I have not yet asked you to enter with me the home of the utterly destitute, where the worthless father drinks up the earnings of sober days, and leaves his wife to work her fingers to the bone at fringe-tying, or corn-grinding, while the children beg in the streets, where the miserable one room of the family is bare even of mats, and a chair has to be borrowed from a

neighbor, when the missionary visitor arrives, and where the *tortillas* are few and far between.

To such, however, especially to such, are the good tidings to be borne, and for such, a welcome is always ready at the mission-house. I have seen a work-worn mother wipe the tears from her eyes, with a corner of her dirty cotton shawl, while listening to the reading of the Bible in the mission-chapel, and I have been convinced by the sight, that to such as she, to the "poor" and the "meek" the word of God is sent through us.

May God who "always leadeth us in triumph in Christ," "manifest through us the savour of his knowledge in every place" and home in fair Mexico!

° JANIE PRICHARD DUGGAN,

*Wake Forest, N. C.*



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